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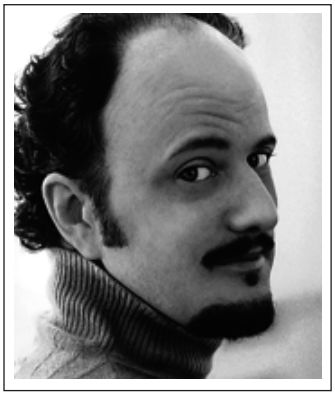
Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:
Middlesex

Author: Jeffrey Eugenides

Jeffrey Kent Eugenides (born April 13, 1960, in Detroit, Michigan) is an American novelist and short story writer of Greek and Irish origins. He attended Grosse Pointe's prestigious University Liggett School and graduated from Brown University in 1983. He later earned a M.A. in Creative Writing from Stanford University. Eugenides lived with his wife, artist Karen Yamauchi, and daughter in Berlin, Germany. He is very reluctant to appear in public or disclose details about his private life. He now resides in Chicago and is reported to be writing a book about Berlin.

Name: Jeffrey Eugenides
Born: c. 1960, in Grosse Pointe Park, MI.
Education: Brown University, B.A. (magna cum laude), 1983; Stanford University, M.A. (creative writing), 1986.



Career:

Writer. *Yachtsman* magazine, photographer and staff writer; American Academy of Poets, New York, NY; various positions including newsletter editor, beginning in 1988. Has worked as a cab driver, busboy, and a volunteer with Mother Teresa in India.

Awards:

Aga Khan Prize for fiction, *Paris Review,* 1991, for an excerpt from the *The Virgin Suicides*; Writers Award, Whiting Foundation, 1993; Henry D. Vursell Memorial Award, American Academy of Arts and Letters; Pulitzer Prize in fiction, 2003, for *Middlesex*; recipient of fellowships from Guggenheim Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, and Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; Berlin Prize fellowship, American Academy in Berlin, 2000-2001; fellow of the Berliner Kuenstlerprogramm of the DAAD.

Past Writings:

The Virgin Suicides, Farrar, Straus & Giroux (New York, NY), 1993.
Middlesex, Farrar, Straus & Giroux (New York, NY), 2002.
Contributor to periodicals, including *Paris Review*.

Media Adaptations:

The Virgin Suicides, a film adaptation written and directed by Sofia Coppola, was released by Paramount Pictures, 2000.

Author: Jeffrey Eugenides (2)

Sidelights:

Novelist Jeffrey Eugenides received critical acclaim for his first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, a tale of five teenaged sisters who one by one kill themselves. His next novel, *Middlesex*, published nine years later, won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

The Michigan-born writer had worked in various fields before graduating from Brown University, including driving a cab in downtown Detroit and working alongside Mother Teresa in Calcutta, India. He later wrote for the American Academy of Poets in New York, and pushed to complete his opus when he learned the organization would soon terminate his position. Eugenides also wrote part of his first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, while traveling down the Nile through Egypt. An excerpt from the book was published in the *Paris Review* in 1991 and won the literary journal's Aga Khan Prize for fiction that year.

The author got the idea for *The Virgin Suicides* while visiting his brother's house in Michigan and chatting with the baby sitter. The young woman said that she and her sisters had all attempted suicide at one point. When Eugenides asked why, she replied simply, "pressure." The theme of inexplicable adolescent trauma amid a placid suburban landscape gave birth to the plot of the novel. *The Virgin Suicides* is set in an unnamed affluent suburb remarkably similar to Eugenides's hometown of Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan, and is told in the collective narrative voice of a group of men who were obsessed with the girls as teenagers. Now nearing middle age, they are still trying to fathom the mysterious suicides of twenty years before, haunted by their memories of the sisters.

The Virgin Suicides juxtaposes the innocence and eroticism of early-1970s suburbia against the unaccountable force that drove the young women to their deaths. The Lisbon family consists of the five lovely daughters, an overprotective and devoutly Catholic mother, and a rather invisible father. The girls are garbed in shapeless, oversized clothes and forbidden to date. The neighborhood boys, entranced by their remoteness, spy on them and rummage through the family's garbage for such collectibles as discarded cosmetics and homework papers. The reader learns how the suicides began as the voice recounts when one of them sneaked into the Lisbon house through a sewer tunnel and peeped in on the youngest, thirteen-year-old Cecilia, as she bathed. To his horror she had also slit her wrists, and her intruder turns out to be a temporary rescuer when he notifies the police. Yet a short time later, during an unlikely party at the somber Lisbon house, Cecilia jumps to her death from a window, impaling herself on a fencepost. The death of a peer fascinates the neighborhood boys: "We had stood in line with her for smallpox vaccinations," the narrator recalls of Cecilia, "had held polio sugar cubes under our tongues with her, had taught her to jump rope, to light snakes, had stopped her from picking her scabs on numerous occasions, and had cautioned her against touching her mouth to the drinking fountain at Three Mile Park."

Soon the girls are grounded permanently and disappear even from the normalcy of a school routine, further piquing the boys' obsession. They watch as one of the sisters, the sexually precocious Lux, fornicates on the roof of the house with mysterious men at night, while neighbors begin to complain about the family's unkempt lawn and the strange odors emanating from the Lisbon house. The boys maintain a distant relationship with the girls, calling them on the phone and signaling to them from neighboring houses. Finally they hatch a plan to rescue the girls in which they will all escape to Florida in a stolen car. In the end, however, the remaining girls commit suicide, leaving the boys to their lifelong preoccupation with the unexplained deaths.

Many reviewers praised the author's use of the wry, anonymous narrative. Tom Prince, in *New York* magazine, described the work as "a highly polished novel about the coarseness of adolescence, relentlessly mournful but also gruesomely funny." *New York Review of Books* critic Alice Truax remarked that "if anything is offensive about *The Virgin Suicides*, perhaps it's that reading it is such a pleasurable, melancholy experience—in spite of its ostensible subject matter." Commenting on Eugenides's style, Truax said "On his first page, he makes it clear that his title means what it says, and that he plans to spin a dreamy, elegiac tale from its terrible promise."

Author: Jeffrey Eugenides (3)

Sidelights:

"Eugenides never loses his sense of humor," Kristin McCloy wrote in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review.* "Mordant to be sure, and always understated, Eugenides's sense of the absurd is relentless." Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* warned that unexplained elements in the novel might "grate on the reader's nerves, momentarily breaking the spell of [Eugenides's] tale." Kakutani, however, described the book's end result as "by turns lyrical and portentous, ferocious and elegiac," and noted that "*The Virgin Suicides* insinuates itself into our minds as a small but powerful opera in the unexpected form of a novel." And *People's* Joseph Olshan added that "the novel manages to maintain a high level of suspense in what is clearly an impressive debut."

Nine years passed between *The Virgin Suicides* and the publication of *Middlesex*. The author returned to Grosse Pointe to tell about a multigenerational Greek-American family through the eyes of its most unusual member: the hermaphroditic Cal (Calliope) Stephanides. Using a male/female narrator posed a challenge: "I wanted the book to be first-person," Eugenides told Dave Welch of Powells. "In many ways, the point of the book is that we're all an I before we're a he or a she, so I needed that I." For practical reasons, the author added, "I wanted the I because I didn't want that terrible situation where the character is she, then you turn the page and she becomes he—or even the more dreaded s/he."

In *Middlesex*, Cal's gender is the product of speculation even before conception. Parents Milton and Tessie long for a girl, and heed an uncle's advice to engage in sex twenty-four hours before ovulation; that way "the swift male sperm would rush in and die off. The female sperm, sluggish but more reliable, would arrive just as the egg dropped." After Tessie becomes pregnant, rancor builds among the relatives when grandma Desdemona, dangling a silver spoon over Tessie's abdomen, declares the child inside a boy. However, the baby born shortly after is deemed female. Calliope spends her childhood and early adolescence as what Laura Miller of the *New York Times* called a "relatively unremarkable daughter." All that changes at puberty when "she" begins sprouting facial hair and speaking in a deepening voice. It is discovered during a doctor's examination that Calliope is a hermaphrodite, possessing equally the physical and sexual characteristics of male and female. "To the extent that fetal hormones affect brain chemistry and histology," the narrator declares, "I've got a male brain."

The girl's horrified parents take her to sexologist Dr. Luce, who proposes a radical "final solution" to Cal's predicament: surgery to remove all outward traces of maleness, and hormonal therapy to reinforce the female characteristics. But for Calliope, that is not the answer. Instead, the character embraces his male identity, and grows to adulthood as an academic in Berlin (where the author lives). Meanwhile, he recounts a twentieth-century family saga that illustrates how Calliope/Cal came to be. He reveals, for example, that grandparents Desdemona and Lefty were brother and sister; and that Cal's own parents married as first cousins.

"Though its premise makes the novel sound as if it's either sensational or clinical—or both," Charles Matthews in a Knight Ridder/*Tribune News Service* review, "it isn't. That's because [*Middlesex*] is as much about the Stephanides family as it is about Cal/Calliope." Matthews added that "even with the element of incest, the story of the Stephanides family doesn't become weirdly titillating or turn into a sentimental problem drama about what's now known as intersexuality. Instead, it's a story based on the familiar dynamics of belonging and displacement." Lisa Schwarzbaum, in *Entertainment Weekly,* said the writing itself "is also about mixing things up, grafting flights of descriptive fancy with hunks of conventional dialogue, pausing briefly to sketch passing characters or explain a bit of a bygone world."

"Because it's long and wide and full of stuff," wrote Miller, the novel "will be associated by some readers with books by David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Frazen, brilliant members of Eugenides's cohort." But unlike those hard-line satirists, the critic added, Eugenides "is sunnier; the book's length feels like its author's arms stretching farther and farther to encompass more people, more life."

Author: Jeffrey Eugenides (4)

Sidelights:

But Keith Gessen of *Nation* acknowledged that this "politically effective" novel displays "too much energy . . . expended" on "the assurance of the author's good intentions. The result is often a measured, highly adequate bloodlessness." Yet to *New Republic* contributor James Wood, the author showcases just the right intentions. "Eugenides's charm, his life-jammed comedy, rescues the novel from its occasional didacticism," he wrote. "One can put it this way: a novel narrated by a hermaphrodite comes to seem largely routine, as if Calliope were simply fat or tall. A fact that might scream its oddity, and that might have been used again and again heavily to explore fashionable questions of identity and gender, is here blissfully domesticated."

Comparing the two Eugenides novels, Mark Lawson of *Europe Intelligence Wire* found that while *The Virgin Suicides* "reflected on connections between sex and death, its successor considers the links between sex, life and inheritance." Lawson also found it strange that "in a novel with such a long gestation, occasional phrases seem hasty." In ten years the novelist had produced only two books, though both well-received; Rachel Collins, in *Library Journal,* said "it is Eugenides's dedication to his stories, his characters, and, yes, even his readers, that compels him to spend years on a manuscript." As for his 2003 Pulitzer Prize-winner, Eugenides told Collins that *Middlesex* "really is Cal's" book "and I think there is nothing ugly about his life. In fact, it's as close to a triumphant story as I'm ever likely to write."

Author: Jeffrey Eugenides (5)

Further Readings:

Books:

Eugenides, Jeffrey, *The Virgin Suicides*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux (New York, NY), 1993.

Periodicals:

Atlantic Monthly, September, 2002, Stewart O'Nan, review of *Middlesex*, p. 157.
Book, September-October, 2002, Penelope Mesic, "Identity Crisis," p. 70.
Booklist, June 1, 2002, Joanne Wilkinson, review of *Middlesex*, p. 1644.
Bookseller, July 5, 2002, "A Family Story with a Difference," p. 35.
British Medical Journal, October 26, 2002, John Quin, review of *Middlesex*, p. 975.
Detroit News, April 3, 1993, review of *The Virgin Suicides*, pp. 1C, 3C.
Economist, October 5, 2002, review of *Middlesex*.
Entertainment Weekly, September 13, 2002, Lisa Schwarzbaum, "Work of Genes," p. 146.
Europe Intelligence Wire, October 5, 2002, Mark Lawson, "Gender Blender"; October 6, 2002, Geraldine Bedell, "He's Not Like Other Girls."
Kirkus Reviews, July 15, 2002, review of *Middlesex*, p. 977.
Knight Ridder/*Tribune News Service*, September 11, 2002, Margaria Fichtner, review of *Middlesex*, p. K7215; September 18, 2002, Charles Matthews, review of *Middlesex*, p. K2795; October 2, 2002, Carlin Romano, review of *Middlesex*, p. K4158; October 30, 2002, Marta Salij, "Pointe of View," p. K4969.
Library Journal, July, 2002, Rachel Collins, review of *Middlesex*, p. 116, author interview, p. 121.
Los Angeles Times Book Review, June 20, 1993, Kristin McCloy, review of *The Virgin Suicides*, pp. 2, 5.
Nation, October 14, 2002, Keith Gessen, "Sense and Sexibility," p. 25.
New Republic, October 7, 2002, James Wood, "Unions," p. 31.
Newsweek, September 23, 2002, David Gates, "The Gender Blender," p. 71.
New York, April 26, 1993, Tom Prince, review of *The Virgin Suicides*, pp. 54-58; September 9, 2002, John Homans, "Helen of Boy," p. 131.
New York Review of Books, June 10, 1993, Alice Truax, review of *The Virgin Suicides*, pp. 45-46; November 7, 2002, Daniel Mendelsohn, "Mighty Hermaphrodite," p. 17.
New York Times, March 19, 1993, Michiko Kakutani, review of *The Virgin Suicides*, p. C23; September 15, 2002, Laura Miller, "My Big Fat Greek Gender Identity Crisis."
People, April 19, 1993, Joseph Olshan, review of *The Virgin Suicides*, p. 27.
Spectator, October 5, 2002, Sebastian Stone, "Putting It All In," p. 43.
Time, September 23, 2002, Richard Lacayo, review of *Middlesex*, p. 78.
Times Literary Supplement, October 4, 2002, Paul Quinn, "In the Centre of the Labyrinth," p. 24.

Online:

Bomb, http://www.bombsite.com/ (April 9, 2003), Jonathan Safran Foer, author interview.
Powells, http://www.powells.com/ (April 9, 2003), Dave Welch, "Jeffrey Eugenides Has It Both Ways."
Read, http://www.randomhouse.ca/ (April 9, 2003), author interview.
Salon, http://www.salon.com/ (October 15, 2002), Laura Miller, "Interview with Jeffrey Eugenides."*

Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2003.

About Middlesex:

A dazzling triumph from the bestselling author of *The Virgin Suicides*, *Middlesex* is the astonishing tale of a gene that passes down through three generations of a Greek American family and flowers in the body of Calliope Stephanides.

"I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974."

So begins Jeffrey Eugenides' second novel, *Middlesex*, the story of Calliope Stephanides, who discovers at the age of fourteen that she is really a he. Cal traces the story of his transformation and the genetic condition that caused it back to his paternal grandparents, who happen also to be brother and sister, and the Greek village of Bithynios in Asia Minor.

In 1922, Desdemona Stephanides and her brother, Lefty, whose parents were killed in the recent war with the Turks, are living alone in their nearly abandoned village. Pulled together by isolation, sympathy, and, perhaps, fate, Lefty and Desdemona become husband and wife, and a recessive genetic condition begins its journey toward eventual expression in their grandchild Calliope.

Middlesex is a story about what it means to occupy the complex and unnamed middle ground between male and female, Greek and American, past and present. For Cal, caught between these identities, the journey to adulthood is particularly fraught. Jeffrey Eugenides' epic portrayal of Cal's struggle is classical in its structure and scope and contemporary in its content; a tender and honest examination of a battle that is increasingly relevant to us all.

Discussion Questions

1. Describing his own conception, Cal writes: "The timing of the thing had to be just so in order for me to become the person I am. Delay the act by an hour and you change the gene selection" (p. 11). Is Cal's condition a result of chance or of fate? Which of these forces governs the world as Cal sees it?

2. *Middlesex* begins just before Cal's birth in 1960, then moves backward in time to 1922. Cal is born at the beginning of Part 3, about halfway through the novel. Why did the author choose to structure the story in this way? How does this movement backward and forward in time reflect the larger themes of the work?

3. When Tessie and Milton decide to try to influence the sex of their baby, Desdemona disapproves. "God decides what baby is," she says. "Not you" (p. 13). What happens when characters in the novel challenge fate?

4. "To be honest, the amusement grounds should be closed at this hour, but, for my own purposes, tonight Electric Park is open all night, and the fog suddenly lifts, all so that my grandfather can look out the window and see a roller coaster streaking down the track. A moment of cheap symbolism only, and then I have to bow to the strict rules of realism, which is to say: they can't see a thing" (pp. 110-11). Occasionally, Cal interrupts his own

Discussion Questions: (Continued)

narrative, calling attention to himself and the artifice inherent in his story. What purpose do these interruptions serve? Is Cal a reliable narrator?

5. "I've never had the right words to describe my life, and now that I've entered my story, I need them more than ever," Cal writes (p. 217). How does Cal narrate the events that take place before his birth? Does his perspective as a narrator change when he is recounting events that take place after he is born?

6. "All I know is this: despite my androgenized brain, there's an innate feminine circularity in the story I have to tell" (p. 20). What does Cal mean by this? Is his manner of telling his story connected to the question of his gender? How?

7. How are Cal's early sexual experiences similar to those of any adolescent? How are they different? Are the differences more significant than the similarities?

8. Why does Cal decide to live as a man rather than as a woman?

9. How does Cal's experience reflect on the "nature vs. nurture" debate about gender identity?

10. Who is Jimmy Zizmo? How does he influence the course of events in the novel?

11. What is Dr. Luce's role in the novel? Would you describe him as a villain?

12. Calliope is the name of the classical Greek muse of eloquence and epic poetry. What elements of Greek mythology figure in Cal's story? Is this novel meant to be a new "myth"?

13. How is Cal's experience living within two genders similar to the immigrant experience of living within two cultures? How is it different?

14. *Middlesex* is set against the backdrop of several historical events: the war between Greece and Turkey, the rise of the Nation of Islam, World War II, and the Detroit riots. How does history shape the lives of the characters in the novel?

15. What does America represent for Desdemona? For Milton? For Cal? To what extent do you think these characters' different visions of America correspond to their status as first-, second-, and third-generation Greek Americans?

16. What role does race play in the novel? How do the Detroit riots of 1967 affect the Stephanides family and Cal, specifically?

17. Describe Middlesex Avenue. Does the house have a symbolic function in the novel?

18. "Everything about *Middlesex* spoke of forgetting and everything about Desdemona made plain the inescapability of remembering," Cal writes (p. 273). How and when do Desdemona's Old World values conflict with the ethos of America and, specifically, of *Middlesex*?

19. The final sentence of the novel reads: "I lost track after a while, happy to be home, weeping for my father, and thinking about what was next" (p. 529). What is next for Cal? Does the author give us reason to believe that Cal's relationship with Julie will be successful?

Discussion Questions: (Continued)

20. "Watching from the cab, Milton came face-to-face with the essence of tragedy, which is something determined before you're born, something you can't escape or do anything about, no matter how hard you try" (p. 426). According to this definition, is Cal's story a tragedy?

Book: Middlesex

NoveList Book Discussion Guide:

Author:

Jeffrey Eugenides was born in 1960 in Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan, the third son of an American-born father whose Greek parents emigrated from Asian Minor and an American mother of Anglo-Irish descent. He completed a B.A. in English at Brown University (1983) and an M.A. in creative writing at Stanford University (1986). He later worked as a cab driver, bus boy, executive secretary for the American Academy of Poets, and staff writer and photographer for *Yachtsman* magazine. During a one-week college break, he volunteered to work with Mother Teresa in India and, at one point, considered becoming a priest. "I was so unformed in my personality and was trying on different personas; being a saint was a bit tight on my shoulders, though. At twenty you can really change your philosophy of the world by reading a single book, or by one chance meeting" (http://www.barnesandnoble.com/writers/writerdetails.asp?cid=473097). After his master's degree, Eugenides received a $20,000 fellowship from the Academy of Motion Pictures to write a screenplay based on one of his short stories. Though this project failed to reach fruition, the fellowship gave him time to write.

Eugenides is the author of *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), the story of five teenaged sisters who kill themselves one by one. An excerpt from *The Virgin Suicides* was published in the *Paris Review* in 1991 and won the journal's Aga Khan Prize for Fiction that year. A *New York Times* critic called the novel "by turns lyrical and portentous, ferocious and elegiac." His fiction has also appeared in the *New Yorker,* the *Gettysburg Review,* the *Yale Review, Best American Short Stories,* and *Granta's Best of Young American Novelists*. His awards include the Whiting Writer's Award (1993), the Guggenheim Fellowship (1994), and the Pulitzer Prize for *Middlesex* (2003). He is the recipient of a fellowship from the National Foundation for the Arts and the Henry D. Vursell Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He has been a fellow at both the Berliner Kunstlerprogramm of the DAAD and the American Academy in Berlin.

In writing *Middlesex*, Eugenides worked from Michel Foucault's *The Memoirs of Herculine Barbin,* the story of a female orphan who is reclassified as male and who ultimately commits suicide. Other influences in writing *Middlesex* include Virgil's *The Iliad,* Ovid's *Metamorphosis,* Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and the fiction of Kafka, Günter Grass, and Salman Rushdie. Other writers he admires are Nabokov, Tolstoy, and the Jewish-Americans writers Saul Bellow and Phillip Roth.

The New York Times's Michiko Kakutani calls *Middlesex* "an uproarious epic, at once funny and sad, about misplaced identities and family secrets," and observes that "Mr. Eugenides has a keen sociological eye for twentieth-century American life" (http://www.barnesandnoble.com/writers/writerdetails.asp?cid=473097). Eugenides currently lives in Germany with his family and writes an occasional book review or popular-music critique. In a *Bomb* interview, Eugenides remarks that his daughter was born midway through the composition of *Middlesex*. "Her influence shows up in the plot, not the style. There's a preoccupation with birth and fetal development in the book. There's a lot about what women go through during pregnancy, and how beside the point men feel in the process. I see my daughter's fingerprints in those details" (http://www.bombsite.com/eugenides/eugenides2.html).

Though Eugenides plays with capturing voice and consciousness in *Middlesex*, blending the modern with the postmodern, the novel is more than an experiment in point of view. What is especially remarkable in *Middlesex* is not its "formal" or "theoretical" elements, but the fact that the narrator, Cal Stephanides, is a "real living hermaphrodite, not a mythical creature like Tiresias or a fanciful one like Orlando" (http://www.powells.com/authors/eugenides.html). Indeed, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* may capture several centuries of literary allusions, but the reader never sees Orlando as a real person. *Middlesex* seems almost memoir-like in comparison, focusing, at times, on the narrator's disquieting understanding of identity and on the wakening of his historical consciousness. Eugenides reminds us that the "main purpose of literature, as it always has been, is to map human con-

NoveList Book Discussion Guide:

Author:

sciousness at a certain time, remembering your thoughts. Even though there's all this scientific investigation of consciousness and the brain world, the only thing that renders consciousness is actually the novel and art, not science at all" (http://www.3ammagazine.com/litarchives/2003/sep/interview_jeffrey_eugenides.html).

Summary:

Cal Stephanides is a forty-one-year-old man who was raised until puberty as a girl, Calliope. Callie has a hereditary 5-alpha-reductase deficiency—likely the result of the fact that his grandmother and grandfather were siblings—that gives her the prepubertal anatomy of a girl. At adolescence, she begins her transformation into ambiguity, or middle-sex, then maleness, and then, gradually, masculinity. Cal, as the story's narrator, leaps into the back story to tell the reader about the orphaned siblings, his grandparents Lefty and Desdemona, who fall in love, and leave Smyrna, Greece and the crumbling Ottoman Empire. On the ship to America, they get married and make up a fictional account of their backgrounds to hide their consanguinity. The consequences of their incest haunt Desdemona till the end of her life.

In Detroit, the newlywed siblings live with their first-cousin Sourmelina and her husband, Jimmy Zizmo. Both women become pregnant on the same night after going to see a production of The Minotaur. Sourmelina gives birth to a girl, Theodora (Tessie), and Desdemona gives birth to a boy, Milton. The same night, Zismo is presumed dead after an accident in which his car plunges into a frozen lake. Desdemona discovers him later as Fard, a Muslim lecturer for the Nation of Islam in Detroit. Desdemona's second child is a daughter, Zoi.

The narrator, Cal, tells the reader about the Greek immigrant community in twentieth-century America, from Ford's assembly lines to bootlegging during Prohibition, through the 1967 race riots, and then to suburban life in a neighborhood called *Middlesex*. As an adolescent, Tessie is courted by a would-be priest, Michael Antoniou, and the religious skeptic, Milton, who joins the Navy and writes to Tessie from afar. Despite Desdemona's initial protestations, Tessie eventually chooses Milton, and they have two children, a son, whom the narrator refers to only as "Chapter Eleven," and Callie. Zoi eventually marries Father Mike. As an adolescent, Callie has strong romantic feelings for a girl referred to only as the Obscure Object. Callie's first sexual encounter is with the Obscure Object's brother, Jerome. After an accident, Callie is taken to the doctor where an examination reveals more than she bargained for. Her parents are informed of Callie's questionable genitalia, and they take her to see a sexologist, Dr. Luce, in New York. Callie eventually runs away and, briefly, becomes a performer in a sex show in San Francisco. Later, a mysterious man calls Milton, claiming to have kidnapped Callie. When Milton shows up with the ransom, he discovers it is Father Mike. During a car chase between the two men, Milton dies. Cal finally returns home to *Middlesex* as a male and makes a certain peace with his mother, brother, and dying grandmother. The novel ends with Cal in Berlin, working as a State Department employee, trying to make romance work with his girlfriend, Julie.

Questions:

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

Book: Middlesex

NoveList Book Discussion Guide:

How does the novel's shifting points of view—and changing characters—serve the larger story?

Like its hermaphroditic narrator, the novel is a hybrid; it combines third-person epic and first-person coming-of-age narrative. It begins with heroic epic narration, not "so far from fairy tale," becomes more realistic in the depictions of Detroit, and deepens psychologically as it moves further into first-person (http://www.powells.com/authors/eugenides.html). The narrator describes his transmogrification from the inside looking out while describing the metamorphoses of others from the outside looking in. Along with Callie's journey across genders, other characters are transformed from Greek to American, young to old, Orthodox to Muslim. When someone tries to resist one transformation, they end up succumbing to another. Taking Fard's "racial denunciations personally," Desdemona even rethinks the race issue (p. 156). These journeys from one category to another take many years and inscribe personal identity within socially expected behavior. Characters take their social contexts with them, as much as they would like to shed them. Callie cannot become "male" without dismantling her femaleness and constructing her masculinity bit by bit, partly out of the same social norms that formulated her femaleness. Nonetheless, Cal needs to find his maleness to make it to the next phase of his life, just as Milt needs to locate his American-ness and middle age to move forward with his mega-business.

There is a kind of generalized "other" in Cal's first-person world that is constantly surfacing and noticing his every move. "Looking back now, I can only remember a time when the world seemed to have a million eyes, silently opening wherever I went" (p. 278). Callie's adolescent self-consciousness shows up in her conclusion that the world is growing eyes, but this is not just a teenager's self-consciousness. It is a narrator's growing wisdom that every sentient being around him has a point of view and that a storyteller can enter those points of view as his personal story swells into an epic. Eugenides has said that the narrator of *Middlesex* is a kind of Christ Pantocrator, who looks down on the partisans and on creation in Greek Orthodox churches. The idea of such an eye looking down on us shows up literally in the middle of Milton's home movies, as he turns the camera on himself, on his "living eye," though it is a little bloodshot (p. 225). The narrator's tricks with point of view are much like Milton's fancy camera work, both capturing the saga of the Stephanideses as well as the "coffee-stained" bags under his own eyes, the perfect blend of family home movie and psychological self-portrait.

In discussing point of view, Eugenides says, "In many ways, the point of the book is that we're all an I before we're a he or a she, so I needed that I" (http://www.powells.com/authors/eugenides.html). But Cal needs the third-person to move through the larger story. Callie even refers to herself in the third person on many occasions. "Calliope appeared poolside" (p. 342); "Calliope unwrapped and flushed" (p. 361); "Calliope's head . . . still thought" (p. 305). By creating distance from herself as a character in her own story, Calliope gains both power and perspective. In inventing his past as much as recalling it, Cal leaves his own body, the "I," and enters the bodies of his ancestors, imagining their lovemaking and journeying, imagining even the sperm and egg that collided to give him his mutated story. By telling himself a multigenerational third-person story, Cal salvages his implausible life and infuses his first-person voice, when it appears, with both the authority of omniscience and the endearment of a limited viewpoint. When his story "splits" and "undergoes meiosis," we move deeper into the first-person account which has been flavored by all that has come before (p. 217).

What does the novel suggest about how gender roles play out spatially?

Gender is not only a social construct that informs behavior. It also dictates where that behavior should take place. Lefty calls forth gendered space when he literally reinstitutes sex segregation in his house, reserving the living room for his male friends and keeping Desdemona in the kitchen or the bedroom. An extreme version of gender cleansing is evident in Michael Antoniou's account of the monks of Mount Athos, "who in their zeal for purity banned not only women from their island monastery but the females of every other species, too" (p. 178). Desdemona realizes that America, despite the Statue of Liberty's gender, was, like Smyrna, about men and their

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wars, evident later when Milton, in the Navy, lowers "boats full of men into various sea conditions," making even the water a place for men to rule (p. 185).

When confronting male authority, the Greek women of *Middlesex* use their own appeals to higher authority to subvert the patriarchy. When Milton refuses to baptize Callie, Desdemona calls on the Virgin Mary and infuses the air with the all-powerful female deity. Sometimes sheer transgression is the only tack that works. In the mosque, Desdemona is asked to stay back in the "women's quarters" and told that she is never to go through the curtains to the main temple (p. 145). But when she does venture toward the temple on her last day at work, she pushes her way into the sanctum sanctorum, and it is here where she discovers that Fard Muhammad is really Jimmy Zizmo. Transgressing gendered space provides her with the truth, identity revealed, but, in the end, patriarchal space is re-invoked. Desdemona spends the final years of her life living alone in the *Middlesex* guest house, waiting for her final resting place next to her husband, even in death.

Gendered space shows up again as Dr. Luce tells Callie stories of the Sambia tribe: "The men and boys sleep on one side of the village, the women and girls on the other. The men go into the women's longhouse only to procreate" (p. 420). But, as Cal informs the reader throughout the novel, there are numerous gender-specific roles in the Greek community as well. During a funeral, a man must remain at the doorway of the deceased's home to make sure the dead person does not reenter. This is the role that Cal himself claims at his father's funeral. A man raised as a girl serves as a guard at the door, a role he would not be allowed to play had he never "evolved" into a man. From the very beginning, Cal is conscious of the spaces occupied by male and female. He imagines a state of prenatal omniscience right before his conception. "Again the sperm rams my capsule; and I realize I can't put it off any longer. The lease on my terrific little apartment is finally up and I'm being evicted. So I raise one fist (male-typically) and begin to beat on the walls of my eggshell until it cracks" (p. 211). The merging of this prenatal space occurs when a sperm fertilizes an egg, the merging of male and female space, resulting in a fetus, and a story.

How are scientific beliefs incorporated into the lives of the characters?

Science, or what passes for it, has a certain hold on the characters of *Middlesex*. Milt, holding onto pseudo-scientific beliefs, wants to plan lovemaking around the proposed fact that male sperm swim faster than female sperm. Tessie, the romantic, believes that an embryo can sense the amount of love with which it was conceived. She maintains that to tamper with the mystery of birth is an act of hubris. She even believes that silkworms react to "historical atrocities," that the silkworms' filaments could turn the "color of blood" during times of tragedy (p. 22). And Desdemona dangles a spoon over the belly of pregnant women to determine the sex of the baby. Before sonograms, people devised whatever method they could, combining empiricism with myth-making. In Tessie's case, Desdemona determines that the baby is a male, but is proven "wrong" the day that Callie arrives. Callie is incorrectly "tagged" in the hospital, evidence, perhaps, that empiricism can be even sloppier than superstition, that the ministers of science are equally fallible.

Science is disregarded when Dr. Philobosian makes his visit to the Stephanides home and reinforces Old World superstition, claiming that "during the conjugal act, whatever the mother happened to look at or think about would affect the child" (p. 115). He advises that a woman worried about having a monstrous baby should fill a syringe with holy water and baptize the infant before it is born. His admonishments subvert science even as he pretends to embrace it, syringe and all. Callie attempts to make sense of her condition by poring over textbooks and encyclopedias "giving evidence of present social conditions" and memorizing the technical terms the doctors use ("hypospadias . . . urogenital sinus . . . blind vaginal pouch") (pp. 431; 421). Scientific evidence is another source of comfort, when fables fail to explain the impossible. Callie reminds us that when people are confronted with a myth, Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster, the first thing they do is try to get a picture, empirical evidence

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(p. 431). This is what the scientific community does when they meet Callie; they cover her face and photograph her body. For the doctors, even her handshake is considered "data" (p. 419). Ultimately, Dr. Luce, Philobosian's foil, advises estrogen injections and cosmetic surgery. Though scientific evidence can put myth in its place, Dr. Luce fails to discern Cal's true gender identity during his daily psychological assessments because she fools him at his own game, fictionalizing early sex play and making up crushes on boys. Science cannot outfox a good performance.

How does the novel characterize America?

Halfway through the novel we learn that "somehow in the course of her life Sourmelina had become an American." Much of *Middlesex* tries to capture that "somehow," the ineffable shift of cultural identity (p. 280). Milton, like Sourmelina, gradually takes on the role of an American. Though he speaks Greek to his parents, he never succeeds in writing it, and eventually forgets "what even the simplest words meant" (p. 191). Later, when he takes the side of the United States, and not Greece, in political debates, he has finally crossed a line. His conservative nationalism shows up in his opposing busing, his increasing sympathy for Nixon, and in his statement to African-Americans and feminists: "The matter with us is you" (p. 246). He represents the increasingly nasty underside of American individualism, captured in the iconography of "landscapes aglow with Manifest Destiny, scenes of Indians being slaughtered" (p. 149). After the family restaurant is burned during the Detroit riot, Milton collects several insurance sums and is ready for the American Dream, symbolized in part by his new 1967 Cadillac Fleetwood. Milton's business picks up because he escapes the rule of location, location, location by championing the American notion of marketing—being everywhere at once. His hot dog restaurants pop up from Michigan to Florida. This kind of Manifest Destiny, entrepreneurial procreation, is evidence of the American way. The hot dogs even flex on the grill.

In many ways, the novel suggests that being an American means looking forward. The future is the greatest real estate. But this is not true for reluctant Americans Desdemona and Cal, both of whom are stuck in the past, Cal because his genitalia will not let him move to the next step with his girlfriend, Julie, and Desdemona because her husband's death has not given her a reason for a future. "Everything about *Middlesex* spoke of forgetting and everything about Desdemona made plain the inescapability of remembering" (p. 273).

Callie, faced with two conflicting cultures, meets the spirit of America head on. When she realizes that she is not maturing properly, she decides to start eating more American food. The chicken pot pies, Tater Tots, and cubed Jell-O, she believes, will help her sprout with the "velocity" of mung beans (p. 303). America and what it represents seems to offer the cure for everything, evident in a peppering of products sprinkled throughout the novel—Dr. Pepper Lip Smacker, Gee Your Hair Smells Terrific, Breck Creme Rinse, Epi*Clear Acne Kit, FemIron pills, and Soft & Dry. Her parents' quest to "cure" Callie typifies yet another American belief, that "everything can be solved by doctors" (p. 426). Even for Desdemona, "certain bits of her adopted country had been seeping under the locked doors of her disapproval" (p. 222). Television was the "first and only thing about America she approved of" (p. 223). She succumbs to watching soap operas and would sometimes awaken to the "The Star-Spangled Banner" playing as the station signed off. But outside of the television, America is a club not easily entered. At prep school with the snobby Charm Bracelet girls, Callie realizes that America was about the "Mayflower and Plymouth Rock. It was about something that had happened for two minutes four hundred years ago, instead of everything that had happened since" (p. 299). The Obsure Object represents that American ideal, even her coloring agreeing with the "American landscape, her pumpkin hair, her apple cider skin" (p. 382). But, after their sexual encounter, Callie no longer has access to this American Dream. Instead of sharing a future with someone, Cal is "back again with the past, with Desdemona who wanted no future at all" (p. 272).

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What does it mean to inhabit a corporeal body?

A body is a bounded vessel chained to the past and a filter for the stimuli of the present. The tactile world is constantly challenging the body's fluid boundaries. Desdemona leans against the kitchen table and discovers eroticism within the "cunning and silence of bodies everywhere" (p. 27). Milton fills Tessie's body with music by pressing his clarinet to her skin, the vibrations penetrating her muscles (p. 176). The body seems to explore on its own "speed," while the "owner" attempts to catch up (p. 285). Callie's body does whatever it wants, undergoing a "growth spurt of uncommon proportions" and eventually sprouting facial hair and other unexpected signs of masculinity (p. 303).

The apparent separation of body and mind shows up repeatedly in *Middlesex*. As long as the body is a "stranger to its owner," it is a source of shame, and the mind seems to become an entity of its own. Callie thinks that the "olive oil her mother drizzled over everything had some mysterious power to stop the body's clock, while the mind, impervious to cooking oils, kept going" (p. 289). The ultimate separation of body and mind occurs while Callie "vacates her body" when she is having sex with Jerome (p. 383). Likewise, when she observes Rex kissing the Obscure Object, Callie mentally slips into the body of Rex Reese. "I entered him like a god so that it was me, and not Rex, who kissed her" (p. 374).

Callie must ultimately leave her female body, both literally and metaphorically, in order to explain her strange puberty. In adopting maleness, Cal must also leave behind the "solidarity of shared biology." Cal will never experience the shared self of womanhood, unlike Sourmelina who, while pregnant, finds it embarrassing to be so "publicly colonized" and "filling her head with music, she escaped her body" (p. 114). Men, on the other hand, think "their bodies are theirs alone. They tend them in private, even in public." More so than most men, Cal's body is truly his alone, a perpetual secret "shrouded in a zone of privacy" (p. 226). The conundrum of his physical self is best condensed in a single photograph, taken for a textbook, where Cal's face is covered by a black box, a "fig leaf in reverse, concealing identity while leaving shame exposed" (p. 422). This photograph is the opposite of the Callie the world knows, where, even in the locker room, she is never fully naked.

Despite brief flights from his physical self, Cal ultimately realizes that "we're chained to our bodies, which are chained to Time" (p. 294). Heredity is the string that Cal uses to find the way through the maze of his own body and the genealogical history it represents. He discovers the "mutated gene that had lain buried in our bloodline for two hundred and fifty years . . . until, coming together with its recessive twin, it started the chain of events that led up to me, here" (p. 361). Like the dictionary chain that she wraps around her wrist, Callie must grab hold of the chain of heredity and feel the weight of a body that is no longer a stranger, a "body that had lived up to the narrative requirements" (p. 396). An immigrant in his own body, Cal acts out another emigration in his move to Europe. Berlin, he reminds us, like Cyprus and Korea, is just another place in the world that is "no longer one thing or the other" and for that very reason is the right place for him to claim as home, for now (p. 363).

How does language empower Callie?

The right words, the right language, give characters leverage over their circumstances. Even though Callie remarks that language, being patriarchal, "oversimplifies feeling" (p. 217), she also notices that the women of her world try to salvage the spoken word and express the inexpressible. Gender itself becomes a kind of language. Children learn to speak "Male or Female the way they learn to speak English or French." Gender is like a native tongue; "it didn't exist before birth but was imprinted in the brain during childhood, never disappearing." (p. 411). The gender of language is the reason that Tessie wants to conceive a baby girl. As Sourmelina says later, a daughter is someone "I can talk to" (p. 118). Tessie, like Callie later, longs for the language to express complicated hybrid emotions (p. 217).

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Callie's brother's sexual apparatus is called a "pitzi," but for what Callie had "there was no word at all." The lack of a term for her genitalia only adds to her sense of powerlessness. Throughout the novel, Callie finds sophisticated words to makes sense of her mysterious circumstances, such as the word periphescence which denotes the "fever of human pair bonding," a term that helps explain her grandparents' unusual pairing (p. 34). She reminds us that ecstasy comes from the Greek ekstasis, meaning a sense of displacement, of being driven out of one's senses, something that both she and the Oracle at Delphi have in common. By learning and using words that few others understand, Callie periodically rises above her doomed life and has leverage over those around her. In looking up the words hypospadias, eunuch, and hermaphrodite in the dictionary, Callie is finally led to the word monster, a word that somehow explains why she is being photographed, why her mother has been reduced to tears, and why her father seems so falsely cheerful. Callie refers to the dictionary's words as a chain, something she winds around her hand, a linguistic artifact. Though not a weapon, it is a tool that gives her leverage. When two men discover her in her first San Francisco hideout, they pull down her pants and call her a "fucking freak," confirming the dictionary's assessment. For a brief moment, the signifier meets the signified (p. 476).

In taking on the role of storyteller, Callie does in fact find her own language and a way to convey impossibly complicated emotions. On the typewriter Callie says that she "quickly discovered that telling the truth wasn't nearly as much fun as making things up" (p. 418). She discovers that language is her coin, her "only trust fund" that can purchase her place in the world, redeeming both her body and her circumstances from freakishness (p. 297). She becomes language itself: "I'm the final clause in the periodic sentence, and that sentence begins a long time ago, in another language, and you have to read it from the beginning to get to the end, which is my arrival" (p. 20).

Cal calls attention to his fictional flourishes, and as he points a finger at Desdemona and Lefty's manufactured history, he acknowledges that he too occasionally tells things not as they happened, but how he imagined them. Nonetheless, he does know, when need be, how to "bow to the strict rules of realism," and he hopes his story will tell the reader everything, even though he realizes that "genealogies tell you nothing," and that Lefty and Desdemona's history is a "fiction created in [a] lifeboat" (pp. 111; 72). Even though his grandparents "made up their lives" to conceal their identities, Cal does not give up on the integrity of language as a form of truth. He stakes his claim on language to salvage these same lives and uses his linguistic dexterity to reveal his own.

How does the house on Middlesex Avenue reflect the novel itself?

The nontraditional house in suburbia represents Cal's own postmodern story. Callie calls the house "sci-fi," futuristic with a sunken living room and octagonal stone blocks. It does not have regular doors or traditional stairs. Stairs, Callie reminds us, represent a "teleological view of the universe, of one thing leading to another" (p. 258). But Cal's story, like his body, does not have a conventional course. Normal development leads to a predictable telos, but Cal's maturation takes him to places he never imagined. Likewise, the *Middlesex* stairs took the "climber to the second floor, but on the way they took him lots of other places as well" (p. 259). The peepholes, glass walls, and views of the hallway give the climber the role of spy, a function Cal takes on in his furtive narrative as he looks into everyone's lives. The various third-person accounts in the novel are not unlike the multiple speakers in the house, which "distorted our voices," projecting a voice from the kitchen into the master bedroom (p. 260). The novel's many voices are ultimately channeled through Cal's consciousness, but this channeling is not devoid of anachronisms and narrative distortion. In *Middlesex*, Callie puts her head in the doorway and gets stuck when the mechanical door closes in on it. The house has a power all its own, just as Cal's story is freighted with its own sense of urgency. Cal may claim to be in command of his story—and the stories of his ancestors—but the story, and history, ultimately locks him in place.

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In the end, *Middlesex* is a place "divested of the formalities of bourgeois life" (p. 529). *Middlesex* does incorporate elements of the traditional, naturalistic novel, but it submerges its Old World episodes into a quirky, fragmented account of reality, taking the reader far beyond a traditional protagonist's quest to annihilate a villain. Eugenides's protagonist is dismantled and reconstructed in narrative pieces that somehow hold together, like the "eccentric" elements of the house that "pretty much is a window" with Callie's fingerprints all over it (pp. 255; 261).

How are lives of the characters like theatrical performances?

The characters of *Middlesex* find themselves witnessing theatrical events that not only mirror their own lives, but blur the line between illusion and reality. At the Detroit Light Guard Armory, Ford employees act out the melting pot metaphor by literally stepping into a pot labeled "Ford English School Melting Pot." Lefty and Desdemona see a performance of *The Minotaur,* where Desdemona, uncomfortable, insists on leaving before the second act. This is the very night that both Desdemona and Sourmelina become pregnant; the beast of the play seems to have come home with them. The children at the school play, performing *Antigone,* also experience the blurred lines between performance and life. Waiting to go on stage, the Obscure Object's lips moved "as if she were speaking Sophocles' lines to Sophocles himself" (p. 338). "This was what she was good at: appearing before people . . . What I was witnessing was a self discovering the self it could be" (p. 338). When one of the children dies mid-performance, the Obsure Object rushes off stage wearing the mask for tragedy, "her eyes like knife slashes, her mouth a boomerang of woe" (p. 339).

Callie is exposed early on to the world of performance. Milton takes her to see movies of Hercules slaying the Nemean lion or stealing the girdle of the Amazons. She even finds the Obscure Object's nickname from the Luis Buñuel film, "That Obscure Object of Desire." It is only fitting that Cal, the narrator, describes so many characters of her story in terms of acting, of the "self discovering what the self could be" (p. 338). Her descriptions of others suggest that life is largely play-acting and that she wasn't the "only faker around" (p. 383). She is amazed at the theatrical metamorphosis Father Mike goes through every week, as he transforms himself from the community's priest to being simply her uncle. "One minute he was up on the balcony . . . The next minute he was back on ground level" (p. 351). Zizmo is also described in these terms. "Of all the actors in my Midwestern Epidaurus, the one wearing the biggest mask is Jimmy Zizmo" (p. 117). Lefty's journey across the ocean, once again, is described in terms of play-acting. Lefty "seized the opportunity of transatlantic travel to reinvent himself. He wrapped a ratty blanket over his shoulders like an opera cape. Aware that whatever happened now would become the truth, that whatever he seemed to be would become what he was—already an American" (p. 67). Even much later, when he suffers his stroke, Callie thinks of him as a "dignified, unpainted mime" (p. 224). Jerome, wandering around the camp in his vampire make-up, sees how far he can take the Goth role he is playing for his film. But his theatrical prankishness is not so unlike what the other characters of the novel do with their own made-up scripts and make-shift costumes.

How is gender like a costume?

Callie learns that both females and males require society's uniform. The genteel women in suburbia wear "chiffon headscarves," and Tessie dresses Callie in "pink skirts, lace ruffles, Yuletide bows" (pp. 262; 224). Milton is also aware of the power of gender-specific clothes. In meeting Dr. Luce, he "armored himself with his most commanding clothes: over his plump body, a charcoal pinstripe suit; around his bullfrog neck, a Countess Mara necktie" (p. 425). As an adolescent, Callie hides inside a bathing suit: "The cups were rubberized, pointy, and beneath a towel or shirt gave me the suggestion of a bust I didn't have" (p. 343). Sophie Sassoon takes care of Callie's facial hair, and Callie and Reetika "painted" their faces in her bedroom (p. 311). "I'd been born Apollonian, a sunkissed girl with a face ringed with curls. But as I approached thirteen a Dionysian element stole over

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my features" (p. 294). In Berlin, after his transformation, Cal smokes cigars and wears double-breasted suits. He admits that "they're a little too much," but he needs them. "They make me feel better" (p. 41). But the costume goes beyond the layer of clothing. "Under the armor of my double-breasted suits is another of gym-built muscle" (p. 107). Even the skin of Cal's body, complete with facial hair, becomes part of the male uniform. When his former female self surfaces, "she does so like a childhood speech impediment," and the male uniform helps to bury Callie forever (p. 41).

Further Reading:

Christopher A. Bohjalian, *Trans-Sister Radio* (2003)

Allie Banks, a schoolteacher in a Vermont town, discovers that her lover, a college professor, is a transsexual who wants to be a woman. Donning women's clothing, an act which elicits a memorable reaction in this small town, is just the beginning for "Dana" Stevens.

David Ebershoff, *The Danish Girl* (2001)

This is a fictional account of Danish artist Einar Wegener, who in 1930 becomes the first man ever to undergo a sex-change operation. His wife Greta, also a painter, is the one who unknowingly starts the chain of events when she asks her husband to put on a dress so that she can finish a portrait she is painting of an opera singer.

Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler's Wife* (2003)

Henry De Tamble is a Chicago librarian with "Chrono-Displacement" disorder. He can suddenly disappear and find himself in the past or future. In his forties, he in fact finds himself time traveling to his wife Clare's childhood and meeting her as a six-year-old. The novel alternates in narration between Henry and Clare's points of view.

Joyce Carol Oates, *them* (1969)

Set in the Detroit of the 1950s and 1960s, *them* tells the story of Maureen Wendall, daughter of working-class parents, who struggles to overcome the economic and social straits into which she is born.

Carol Anshaw, *Lucky in the Corner* (2002)

Fern's deep affection for her dog Lucky is about the only constant in her topsy-turvy life. Her mother, who left Fern's father years ago for another woman, is now cheating on her lover. Fern's promiscuous best friend Tracy has a baby and then leaves him at Fern's. Lucky and kind, cross-dressing Uncle Harold are Fern's only sources of support as she struggles in college, works a 900-number as a psychic, and tries to wrestle with her own problems and those created by those she loves.

Kate Atkinson, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1996)

Behind the Scenes at the Museum is a coming-of-age story set in York in the north of England. From her home above the family pet shop, Ruby Lennox describes comic and tragic events from the moment of her conception in 1951 until her mother's death in 1992. The story also dips back into the family past to great-grandmother Alice Barker's disappearance from the lives of her husband and six children in 1888, and family fortunes during the three great English-German conflicts of the twentieth century: World War I, World War II, and the 1966 World Cup Finals.

Book: Middlesex

NoveList Book Discussion Guide:

May, 2005

This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Paul Mihas, the managing editor of Social Forces, a sociology journal published by the University of North Carolina Press.

Reviews:

Booklist Review, June 2002

In his second novel, the author of *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) once again proves himself to be a wildly imaginative writer, this time penning a coming-of-age tale, ranging from the 1920s in Asia Minor to the present in Berlin, about a hermaphrodite. Perhaps what is most surprising about Eugenides' offbeat but engrossing book is how he establishes, seemingly effortlessly, the credibility of his narrator: "I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan." So starts Cal's remarkably detailed odyssey, which began when his grandparents, who were siblings, married and vowed to keep the true nature of their relationship a secret; however, their deception comes back to haunt them in the form of their grandchild. With a sure yet light-handed touch, Eugenides skillfully bends our notions of gender as we realize, along with Cal, that although he has been raised as a girl, he is more comfortable as a boy. Although at times the novel reads like a medical text, it is also likely to hold readers in thrall with its affecting characterization of a brave and lonely soul and its vivid depiction of exactly what it means to be both male and female. Copyright 2002 *Booklist Reviews*

Library Journal Review, July 2002

Website: http://www.cahners.com

Eugenides's second novel (after *The Virgin Suicides*) opens "I was born twice: first, as a baby girl...in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy...in August of 1974." Thus starts the epic tale of how Calliope Stephanides is transformed into Cal. Spanning three generations and two continents, the story winds from the small Greek village of Smyrna to the smoggy, crime-riddled streets of Detroit, past historical events, and through family secrets. The author's eloquent writing captures the essence of Cal, a hermaphrodite, who sets out to discover himself by tracing the story of his family back to his grandparents. From the beginning, the reader is brought into a world rich in culture and history, as Eugenides extends his plot into forbidden territories with unique grace. His confidence in the story, combined with his sure prose, helps readers overcome their initial surprise and focus on the emotional revelation of the characters and beyond. Once again, Eugenides proves that he is not only a unique voice in modern literature but also well versed in the nature of the human heart. Highly recommended. - Rachel Collins, *Library Journal* Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information.

School Library Journal Review, March 2003

Website: http://www.cahners.com

Adult/High School—From the opening paragraph, in which the narrator explains that he was "born twice," first as a baby girl in 1960, then as a teenage boy in 1974, readers are aware that Calliope Stephanides is a hermaphrodite. To explain his situation, Cal starts in 1922, when his grandparents came to America. In his role as the "prefetal narrator," he tells the love story of this couple, who are brother and sister; his parents are blood relatives as well. Then he tells his own story, which is that of a female child growing up in suburban Detroit with typical adolescent concerns. Callie, as he is known then, worries because she hasn't developed breasts or started menstruating; her facial hair is blamed on her ethnicity, and she and her mother go to get waxed together. She develops a passionate crush on her best girlfriend, "the Object," and consummates it in a manner both

Reviews: (Continued)

detached and steamy. Then an accident causes Callie to find out what she's been suspecting—she's not actually a girl. The story questions what it is that makes us who we are and concludes that one's inner essence stays the same, even in light of drastic outer changes. Mostly, the novel remains a universal narrative of a girl who's happy to grow up but hates having to leave her old self behind. Readers will love watching the narrator go from Callie to Cal, and witnessing all of the life experiences that get her there. Jamie Watson, Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information.

BookPage Review, September 2002

Website: http://www.bookpage.com

Eugenides Bridges the Gender Gap

There is a fine tradition of big, burly multi-generational sagas in American literature, but Jeffrey Eugenides' second novel, *Middlesex*, is probably the only one narrated by an omniscient hermaphrodite. With Dickensian directness, Cal Stephanides gets right to the point in the opening sentence. "I was born twice: First, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974."

Not your ordinary opening line, but then *Middlesex* is anything but ordinary. It is "out there" in the best sense—a wry, unpredictable and ultimately wise book that has much to say about gender identity, family, adolescence and American values. It is funny and poignant and mythical, and very hard to put down.

Cal is baptized Calliope in a Greek Orthodox church on the eastside of Detroit, and for the next 14 years is raised as a girl. The doctor who brings her into the world is a 74-year-old Armenian who came over on the boat with Calliope's grandparents. Not quite the doctor he once was, he fails to notice that this baby has rather unusual genitals. No one notices, in fact, until Calliope hits puberty and starts to figure out that she is not like the other students at the all-girl school she attends. She remains flat-chested and never begins to menstruate. Her hormones are raging, but the object of her passionate affections is not some teenaged boy, but a redheaded classmate.

Just how Calliope ended up a hermaphrodite and what happens when she finds out is the two-directional story this novel tells. It travels back to Bithynios, a village in eastern Turkey, whence her grandparents, Desdemona and Lefty, flee during the 1922 war between the Greeks and the Turks. The two marry aboard the boat to America and keep secret the fact that they are sister and brother. After many generations of cousins marrying cousins in their little village, poor Calliope will bear the brunt of this even closer than normal interbreeding. Desdemona and Lefty end up in Detroit, and their son, Milton, lives out the mid-century American dream as an aspiring clarinetist, World War II vet and successful restaurateur. He marries Tessie, who also happens to be his second cousin. Calliope's genetic fate is sealed.

One of the great achievements of this book is its portrait of Detroit over a period of 75 years. Calliope's grandparents arrive in the midst of Prohibition, and after a very brief stint as a cog in Henry Ford's industrial machine, Lefty turns to bootlegging. Desdemona, who brought an arcane knowledge of silk production with her from Asia Minor, works for a time within the secret confines of an early incarnation of the Nation of Islam. Milton takes the considerable amount of insurance money he collects when his restaurant burns during the 1967 race riots and heads for the tony suburb of Grosse Pointe and a house with the prescient name of Middlesex. It is there, during the polyester '70s, that Calliope will discover she is really a boy.

Reviews: (Continued)

A visit to New York Hospital, where sexual disorder and gender identity guru Dr. Peter Luce conducts his research, confirms the worst. But while Calliope displays an XY karotype, which means he is biologically a boy, Dr. Luce decides that he should continue life as the girl he has been raised to be. Cal has other ideas, though. She runs away and meets with a few surprising adventures while trying to figure out exactly who she or he is.

Jeffrey Eugenides proved in his first novel, the cult classic *The Virgin Suicides*, that he understands adolescent angst, and he is adept at conveying Cal's confusion. Many of us had a hard time surviving the obstacles of adolescence without having to deal with the ramifications of a muted fifth chromosome. But despite this added liability, Cal remains remarkably upbeat, levelheaded and precociously wise. She—later he—is a cool kid, who handles things with more equilibrium than most. It's as if some measure of the ancient wisdom of her Greek forebears has been passed down along with the genetic mutation.

Given his biological makeup, this particular strand of the Stephanides line will end with Cal. But *Middlesex* does not end with sadness, it ends with a kind of hope that springs from Cal's humor-tempered realization that we humans can get used to just about anything, if we give it a chance.

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